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ABSTRACT

Reading programs for special admit college students were developed and included 13 skills: reading for main ideas and supporting details, noting sequence and development of main ideas and supporting details, developing flexibility in reading, underlining, summarizing, synthesis of several sources, critical reading, comparison and contrast of ideas, note taking, study reading techniques, preparation and taking of exams, development of research and term papers, and organization for study. In selecting the content for the course, articles and books were analyzed for interest level, the skills needed for understanding, and the skills that could be illustrated and taught through the material. The readability level for all the material was also determined. An evaluation of the program was conducted by comparing the pre- and posttest results of the comprehension section of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. The results indicated the students improved between pre- and posttesting. Group 1, the slower moving strand, improved an average of over two and one-half years, and group 2 showed an improvement of over three years. This growth was significantly more than normally expected for a semester's course in reading improvement. (WR)

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A CONTENT APPROACH TO READING SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR SPECIAL ADMIT FRESHMEN IN A FOUR YEAR COLLEGE

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CS 000 339

A CONTENT APPROACH TO READING SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR SPECIAL ADMIT FRESHMEN IN A FOUR YEAR COLLEGE

Introduction

Reading programs for special admit students have become standard offerings at many colleges in the United States. However, many of these courses have not been very successful in overcoming the reading problems of special students. One consistently hears about lack of attendance, poor motivation and low achievement when working in these programs. Furthermore, when these students are enrolled in credit courses, teachers report that they do not transfer many of the skills learned in their reading courses to the reading requirements of their regular courses.

Some schools have attempted to solve these problems by duplicating the regular course requirements within the reading improvement courses. But, this approach is generally impractical for two reasons: 1) Each reading improvement section includes students taking a variety of college courses: and 2) Using credit course materials does not guarantee that the student will be any more interested in learning than when using traditional reading improvement materials.

For these reading programs to be successful, they must create a situation where students learn the skills because they are pragmatically useful to them for understanding content they want to learn, not because someone has said they had to learn skills. Edwards (1967) would add that these courses also consider and implement the psycho-social adjustments for special admit students in a college situation.

on skill development. Content became more than simply a vehicle for learning, it became a motivation and energizing force in the curriculum because it incorporated the interests of the students.

At this point, we want to emphasize that skill development was still important and the same basic skills were developed in the present course as in any reading program. However, they were perceived as the link between interest and successful understanding of relevant material and not as a separate aspect to be learned. The purpose was to have the skills internalized, thus allowing transfer of these skills to other subjects so that the students might better obtain their own personal and academic goals.

To implement this type of curriculum, the twin areas of content and skills were developed simultaneously in the planning stages. However, for the purposes of illustration, the two areas will be discussed separately.

The first step was the isolation and listing of the skills necessary for college success. These included both reading and study skills. Then, each of these skills was analyzed in terms of its individual components and a sequence was planned that built upon the parts of already learned skills. The assumption was made that the more similar were the components of the separate skills, the easier would be the initial learning, internalization and transfer of these skills to novel reading and study situations.

The following skills were included in the course:
Reading for the main ideas and supporting details; Noting sequence and development of main ideas and supporting details· Developing flexibility in reading; Underlining; Summarizing; Synthesis of several

sources; Critical reading: Comparison and contrast of ideas; Note taking Study reading techniques: Preparation and taking of exams; Development of research and term papers; Organization for study. Two additional skills were also introduced through this course but they were continued as separate entities once they were introduced. These skills were vocabulary development and rapid reading.

While the skill analyzation was being completed, the content for the course was also being selected. This selection was done by several methods. The first was our knowledge gained over three semesters, of what types of materials and issues these students were interested in learning. The second was the use of teaching assistants as resource people for suggesting relevant content.

Each article or book considered was analyzed for its interest level, the skills needed for understanding, and the skills that could be illustrated and taught through the material. In addition, the readability level for all the material was determined. Hence, a number of content materials were isolated that could be organized around skills in stepwise fashion and yet encourage the reading and transfer of these skills to novel reading situations.

The following materials illustrate the type of content used for instruction.

I. Primary Content Materials

Autobiography of Malcolm X, Malcolm X
To Kill a Black Man, Louis Lomax
Post-Prison Writings & Speeches, E. Cleaver
Look Out Whitey, J. Lester
Hidden Persuaders, Vance Packard
People or Personnel, Paul Goodman

II. Secondary Content Materials

Secondary content materials were articles selected for skill transference on the basis of (1) their similarity to a chosen analytical perspective, e.g., the identity problem, with respect to each of the primary materials; (2) their increasing level of difficulty; and (3) their gradual shift in orientation from high interest content to more traditional college content.

The process of transfer was carefully considered in structuring the introduction of skills and content. It was necessary for us to establish that the process of learning and the application of the skills to college reading material was meaningful and useful to the students. This could not take place if the student did not perceive that this process allowed for his personal involvement in, and give him the opportunity for success within the learning situation. Hence, the skills and content used to teach them were carefully arranged to create a learning environment that insured a smooth transfer to new material.

Several teaching strands were developed to meet the variety of reading (and study skill) needs of our students. Basically, this involved tailoring the rate of learning to the abilities of the students to assimilate and transfer the skills to college reading situations. This resulted in some students completing the course sequence in one semester while others took both semesters.

The instructional program that was developed to implement the above concepts was essentially a spiral curriculum in both content and skill introduction. First, a skill was introduced and taught

with interesting content. Then, it was applied to more difficult but still interesting content while another skill was introduced that built upon the components of the earlier skill. The purpose of building new skills on the components of already learned ones was to encourage transfer and application of the earlier skills to different reading and study situations..

The first series of lessons used in our course will serve to illustrate how skills and interesting content were unified for all strands. The remainder of the program followed the same basic pattern and only varied the skills taught and content used.

Students were introduced to the book Autobiography of Malcolm X (1966) on the first day of class. The instructors also discussed reading for the main ideas and supporting details while the book was being introduced. Practice was given in this type of reading on the beginning pages of the first chapter. Then, the students were asked to isolate the major ideas and supporting details in the first two chapters for homework.

The following day, the class discussed and diagrammed the development of the major themes in the first two chapters. This procedure was continued for several chapters and then one period was spent sequencing the major ideas developed by the author in these chapters. Later, the students were required to develop the major ideas from the first ten chapters and show how these events lead to Malcolm's acceptance of the Muslin faith. Reading flexibility was then introduced and the students were shown how to vary their reading approach to comprehend only the important points in relation to the main ideas and

supporting details. Practice of this skill was done for the remainder of the book.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X was also used as the primary content material in the transference of the skill, e.g., reading for main ideas, to more traditional or "secondary content materials." Secondary content materials were selected on the basis of (1) their similarity to a chosen perspective on the Autobiography of Malcolm X, e.g., the problem of identity, (2) their increasing level of difficulty, and (3) their gradual shift in orientation from high interest content to more traditional college content. The problem of identity was introduced through the Autobiography of Malcolm X and concept formation about the problem was stimulated through discussion that focused on key issues such as the process of self formation, the role of the family, class, school, peer group, etc. The class then read an excerpt from Paul Goodman's book, Growing Up Absurd, (1960) with the goal of analyzing Goodman's examination of the identity problem. The class then discussed the similarities and differences between the concepts formulated by the class about the identity problem through the Autobiography of Malcolm X and those found in the article by Paul Goodman. The same process was repeated with an article by C.H. Cooley, "The Looking-Glass Self." New York: Free Press, (1962).

After the book and related articles were completed, the students were asked to bring in their own textbooks and individual help was given to reading in subject matter disciplines. The purpose was to illustrate how the skills already taught resulted in better understanding of the textbook materials. This entire process was repeated for each set of skills throughout the course.

Student progress was evaluated through class discussion, assignments and short tests. Any weak skill component identified for specific students was retaught and practiced through outside assignments and counseling with that student.

An additional feature of our program was the use of undergraduates as teaching assistants in our classes. They served as both instructors and tutors. Many of these students had also been instrumental in bringing our program to fruition. Basically, they were in the class to help us maintain relevancy from the student's position (by suggesting content and methods of instruction), and to help bridge the gap between talking about a skill and its internalization by the student. In most instances, these teaching assistants helped to plan specific lessons and participated directly in the instruction.

Evaluation of Student Progress

An objective evaluation of the success of the above program was attempted by comparing the pre and post test results of the comprehension section of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. This comparison included only those students enrolled in the Reading Improvement Sections which followed this program. Students reading at or above college level were placed in advanced Study Skill sections and were not exposed to the program discussed in this report. Hence, they were not included in this analysis.

Because of the nature of the program, no control groups were available that included students similar to those enrolled in our Reading Improvement courses. Hence, the results were compared against a theoretical concept of an expected growth curve. The assumption was made that the normal amount of growth usually expected with

developmental reading programs is usually one year's growth for every semester of concentrated work in reading. Specifically, we subtracted one year from each students gain scores and then used the test statistic for correlated means to evaluate whether our program resulted in better than expected growth. The formula used for evaluation was expanded to $\bar{D} 1 = 0$

The test results showed that students in both strands of the Reading Improvement Sections improved substantially between pre and post testing on the Nelson-Denny Test. This improvement averaged over 2-1/2 years for the Reading Improvement I group, which was essentially the slowest moving strand, and over three years for the Reading Improvement II groups. Both increases were significant when tested against the theoretical concept discussed earlier. Pre and post test mean scores have been reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1

The data was also examined by computing the percentage of student's testing at each grade level on both the pre and post test. This comparison showed that the majority of students on the pre test scored at or below ninth grade. On the post test, there was a shift upward that resulted in the majority of students being at or above tenth grade. The interesting feature here was that 31 per cent of the students moved to the reading level of entering college freshmen while on the pre test no one scored in those categories for these groups. The percentage of students reading at each grade has been reported in Table 2.

Insert Table 2

Discussion

The growth scores of the students indicate that the program reported in this paper improves special admit student's reading ability. This growth was significantly more than normally expected for a semester's course in Reading Improvement.

Attendance and motivation of the students has also been consistently good throughout the course. We feel this has been caused by our procedure of using relevant materials and issues to teach the skills, and consideration of the students perceptions of the learning situation when developing the course sequence. The students are interested in and can see the value of what is occuring inside the classroom.

Another possible reason for the success of our program may have been that it occurred at a time when the students were moving from one educational experience to another. Bloom (1964) indicates in his report on human characteristics that for a student to effect a change in his learning style, the best time to cause this change after the growth curve has reached the optimum development is when educational experiences are radically altered. This type of situation existed in our program because the students were entering college for the first time. Hence, our course, which was radically different from their reading experiences in high school, occurred at a time when they were experiencing a totally new learning situation.

However, it must be stated that this course is not offered as a panacea for all problems in this area. We still have some students that are not attending regularly and do not appear motivated to learn the skills necessary for success in college. But, their number is far less than before and the majority of the students that have remained with the program show more enthusiasm and willingness to learn than they did with the reading program we used before.

Of course, the final evaluation of this program will lie in the area of academic success: how well the students are succeeding with the reading and study assignments in their other courses. At present, the students do appear to be meeting with success in completing and understanding the assigned readings for their college courses. Furthermore, when problems are encountered the students are attempting to solve them rather than withdrawing. Finally, less students are dropping courses or failing to attend classes.

Table 1

Grade Level Scores on Pre and Post Test
Comprehension Section of the Nelson Denny Reading Test

Reading Improvement I
Section N=7

Pre test Mean	SD	Post test Mean	SD	Gain	t-score
6.26	1.73	8.95	1.76	2.69	2.46*

Reading Improvement II
Sections N=49

Pre test Mean	SD	Post test Mean	SD	Gain	t-score
9.23	2.00	12.34	1.76	3.11	12.44**

*Significant at the .02 level for a one tail test.

**Significant at the .001 level for a one tail test.

Note: Eight students in the five sections were not included in this analysis. The total N for all sections was 64 students.

Table 2

Percentage of Students Testing at Each Grade Level
on Pre and Post Comprehension Section of
the Nelson Denny Reading Test
N = 56

ests	Grade Levels							
	Below 8th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	13th+
Pre test	33%	12%	35%	11%		9%		
Post test	4%	10%	4%	24%	4%	23%	15%	16%

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